

INTRODUCTION TO THE PERFORMING ARTS

PLEASE RETURN TO
THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
AUDIO VISUAL SERVICES
UNIVERSITY PARK, PA. 16802



Walter Kerr on Theatre



BACKGROUND INFORMATION for TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

To Accompany the Film:

Walter Kerr on Theatre

OBJECTIVES OF THE FILM:

1. To demonstrate the joy, magic and power of the theater.
2. To provide insight into the unique characteristics of live drama by contrasting excerpts from outstanding plays with film.
3. To show the range of forms and ideas possible in live theater.

SUBJECT AREAS: English, Humanities, Communication Arts

FILM CONTENT:

Walter Kerr, one of America's major drama critics, provides insight into the nature and function of drama by commenting on dramatic scenes from five plays and comparing them with film.

A tense scene from *No Place To Be Somebody*, Charles Gordone's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama about racial discrimination, illustrates the open conflict characteristic of many plays. This stage drama is then contrasted with a filmed version of the same scene to point out the greater reality of live stage experience.

Excerpts from a Buster Keaton film demonstrate that film has its own excitement, a tremendous scenic range and special effects the stage can't provide. It records outer events, gestures and action superbly, but is less able to record inner qualities. It fragments and rarely explores in depth. An eloquent monologue by a black playwright (played by Gordone himself) whose career suffers because of racial discrimination, illustrates how drama can portray inner conflict through prolonged outpouring of feeling.

The last passage from *Prometheus* and the death scene from Shakespeare's *Richard III* demonstrate the power of language to convey inner turmoil.

In a scene from *The Serpent*, performed by an experimental group, The Open Theatre, both outer and inner conflict is shown. Cain does not know how to kill Abel. As he gropes in his mind, he experiments with various methods which occur to him. When he succeeds, he shows that he does not understand death.

The reactions of the audience, seated at the feet of the actors, show how spectators' feedback to the players helps both, cooperatively, to create a vision of truth. The theater provides not only pleasure but also treats social issues and burrows into self-consciousness. It helps viewers clarify thoughts about life issues and the human condition. The same type of interplay between audience and actors is evidenced in a scene from a comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

SUGGESTED PROCEDURE BEFORE VIEWING:

1. Have on hand copies of the five plays treated in the film.
2. Students may need to learn the myth of Prometheus.
3. To arouse interest in the film, a few students might enact a brief scene of conflict, a fight or an argument, before the class. Through discussion of the event, help the class discover that drama (a) differs from real life in that it screens out unessential detail by focusing on an important idea, and (b) involves the spectator through all his senses, thus giving an illusion of reality. (Students will probably feel that the incident is really happening and will tend to identify with one of the actors.)
4. Define *conflict* and point out that it is central to most dramas. But why should we have stage drama when we have exciting films and television programs? Discuss briefly, then suggest that students watch the film to find out how it attempts to answer this question.
5. Preteach vocabulary of words italicized below if necessary.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES AFTER VIEWING AND DISCUSSION:

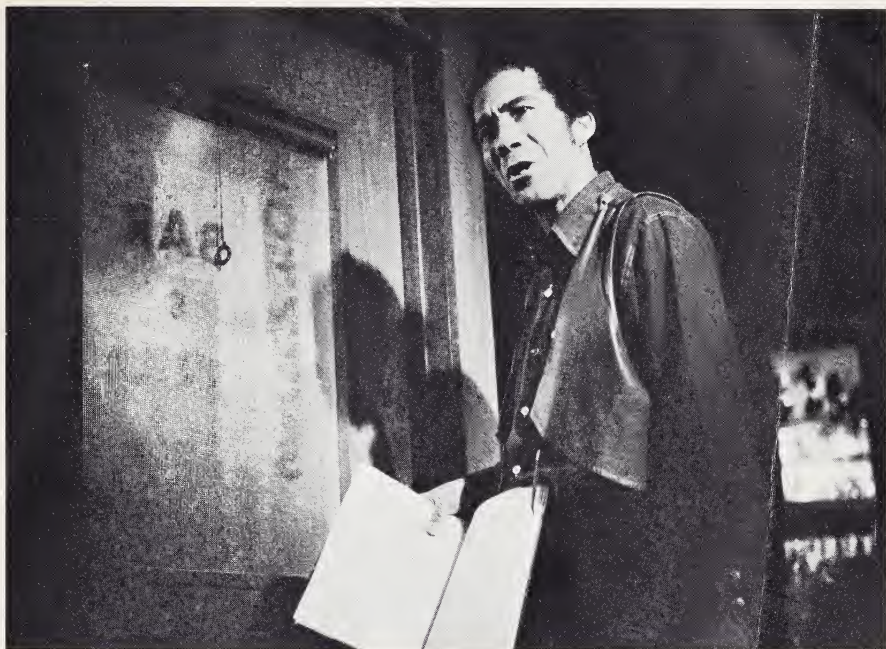
1. Show the film a second time, stopping after various sequences for further discussion.
2. To illustrate that the drama, which utilizes mental rather than pictorial imagery, often requires more imagination and involvement on the part of the spectator than film, have students close their eyes and envision these phrases from *Prometheus* and *Richard III*:
"air rent by thunder crash"
"savag winds convulse the sky"
"waves rise up and drown the stars"
"let me be swept to hell"
"dead wounds open their congealed mouths and bleed afresh"
"thou lump of foul deformity"
"cold empty veins"
3. Those interested might read one of the plays treated here.
4. Some students might create a play about their school or neighborhood. Others might make a film on a similar theme. Have the class evaluate the effectiveness of the communication of meaning in each media form.
5. Read or see a live drama. Then view a film of the same work. Compare the two.

INCREASING AWARENESS OF DRAMA AS A COMMUNICATION ART

A. THE FUNCTION OF DRAMA

To promote further insight into the functions of drama, discuss the theories of:

1. *Catharsis*: Aristotle felt that tragedy enabled people to reach a state of tranquility through the expenditure of emotions over human sufferings witnessed in drama.
2. *Alienation*: Brecht felt that the intellectual, not the emotional, component of drama constituted its value. By heightening and ordering reality, drama enables us to see life and human nature more clearly.
3. *The Puritan Ethic*: holds that drama should have moral value.



4. *The Theater of the Absurd*: prizes irrationality which causes the viewer to feel detached. Through bizarre or seemingly senseless action and dialogue, good "absurd" drama (such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) stirs deep reflective thought on life issues. This form of theater has much in common with surrealist painting and film.

Any really good drama, film, or television show involves a set of ethical beliefs which offer a prescription for living. Drama of any age reflects the society of its creators. Serious contemporary drama reflects a breakdown of understanding and the failure of all people to reach and communicate with each other. Contrasted with this pessimism, optimistic popular plays express the value of money and education for success in life.

Drama seldom expresses a philosophy in a direct way. It does not deliberately teach, but instead reveals meaning through exposing us to heightened life situations which make us reflect and see life issues more clearly. Good drama leads us to some truth through its *theme* around which characters and plot revolve.

The major test for meaning in any work is the *universality of its theme*. Great plays such as *Prometheus* are meaningful to all men in all times everywhere, for they deal with the basic life concerns common to all humanity. All great plays deal in some way with four basic problems:

1. What is the nature of man?
2. What is man's purpose in living?
3. What is man's destiny?
4. What is the "good life"?



B. DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS

The theater is a game. To enjoy it one must accept its rules, or *conventions*, which differ from age to age and drama to drama. Among the most common conventions are:

1. *The pretense of a fourth wall* to the stage.
2. *Verisimilitude*: surface realism. Films have more realism than the theater.
3. *Suspended belief*: To maintain audience belief, the conventions used should be consistent with each other.
4. *Scene*: Elaborate scenery may be an important factor in some dramas while a few props are accepted as a scene in others.
5. *Tone*: Whether it is serious, somber, tragic, comic, or absurd, the audience expects the tone to be maintained throughout the play.
6. *Characters*: Are they suitable to the plot? consistent?
7. *Action*: Must be in keeping with the character portrayed and have plausibility.

C. FACTORS WHICH ADD TO MEANING OF A DRAMA

1. *Names of characters* (especially in *allegorical* or *morality* plays) give insight into the nature of personages in the play.
2. *Costume* also conveys information about the characters.
3. *Sets, lights* help to create mood and establish atmosphere.
4. Objects used as *symbols* help create the world of illusion in which characters act. Tiny glass figurines in *The Glass Menagerie* help create a feeling of the fragility of the players' world. Other types of symbols are represented by the orchard and the sound of the ax in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

D. DRAMATIC TERMS

1. *Protagonist*: The central figure around which the drama occurs. In real life there are central figures only occasionally.
2. *Conflict* may be caused by the villain or by inescapable forces. It may be between the protagonist and the antagonist or a larger force.

3. *Plot*: Classic pyramidal plot structure involves *prologue, intensification, obligatory moment, suspense, resolution*.
4. *Style*: There are various styles of communicating meaning through drama, and each has its special *conventions and structure*. Compare *romantic sentimentalism* with *Classic Greek and French Neoclassic drama*; report on *Method acting*.

E. DRAMA COMPARED TO FILM AND OTHER ART FORMS

Film is at its best when it makes greatest use of what is peculiarly its own, the recording of time and space, cutting them up in bits and glueing them together in new relationships.

A *photoplay* is not true film but a filmed version of a play. True film is a medium of action which suggests ideas and feelings through pictorial imagery. Pictures can get at things that neither written nor spoken words can say. When pictures are used merely to illustrate words, the film fails. A picture needs no verbal equivalent.

Television has different characteristics which provide intimate closeups and hyperauthenticity. Familiarize students with basic film terms such as *editing, shot, dissolve, sequence, cutting*.

Suggested Activities:

1. Compare a stage play, seen or read, with its filmed version. Or compare Poe's short story *The Tell-Tale Heart* with the animated film of the same masterpiece (Learning Corporation, color, 8 minutes). Discuss how each art form conveys meaning in its own way.
2. Display Rubens' baroque painting, "Prometheus Bound." Note the use of violent contortion, dramatic line, color and action to stir emotion in the viewer. Read excerpts from Shelley's poem of the same name. Why is poetry close to drama in its effect? (Painting is a space art; poetry and music exist in time. Drama, like ballet and opera, is a space-time art.)
3. Have students express an idea such as "The Spirit of Black Rage" or another of their own choosing by creating a collage of news photos or combining such pictures with black protest poetry.
4. Discuss the implications of using film to show the essential characteristics of drama, as was done in this film.

THE PLAYS

No Place To Be Somebody, Charles Gordone, in *Best Plays of 1969*, Dodd Mead & Co.

Prometheus, Aeschylus, in *Three Greek Plays*, Edith Hamilton, trans. Norton

The Importance of Being Earnest, Oscar Wilde, various editions

The Serpent, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Atheneum

Richard III, Shakespeare, various editions



Learning Corporation of America, 711 Fifth Avenue, New York 10022

A SUBSIDIARY OF COLUMBIA PICTURES INDUSTRIES, INC.

These may be reproduced only by teachers for educational use in the classroom.
Any other reproduction is prohibited.

